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Master Plans

So what is a Master Plan?

Under New Hampshire law (RSA 674), a municipal master plan is a Town's view of how it would like to see development occur, or not occur, in the future in specific geographic areas within its boundaries. A master plan generally consists both of policy statements and maps.

Who prepares it? Who adopts it? What is its authority?

Preparing and adopting the master plan is the responsibility of the local planning board, although many communities develop a master plan committee, usually chaired and led by some planning board members, but inclusive of a broad array of interests in the community.

The planning board is directed to gather views and perspectives from a wide variety of individuals and organizations in the community. They may develop the plan themselves, or (as noted above), they may delegate the responsibilities to a subcommittee which reports to the planning board. They may hire staff and/or consultants to work with them in its preparation.

The master plan is to be adopted by the planning board, but only after a public hearing has been noticed and held. It becomes effective once it has been certified by a majority of the board, and a copy placed on file with the town clerk. Like all public documents, it is subject to the right to know law.

The authority of the master plan is more tenuous. It is not the power that it holds in and of its own right so much as the power that it enables. A zoning ordinance must be based on a current master plan. The capital improvement plan should be a vehicle for implementing the goals in the master plan. Subdivision and site plan regulations should relate to the goals of the master plan. The master plan is the source of the goals and the outline of the desired action more than a binding document in and of itself.

So what has to be in the Master Plan?

Master plans can take a variety of forms and formats, depending on the wishes of the community preparing them. Some are extensive documents. Others are more slender. Some include large amounts of historical data. Others focus on the present and the future. Several years ago Harrisville, New Hampshire, produced a master plan that was simply a poster. Many

communities produce an extensive document for official use, and a much more abbreviated one for public distribution.

Technically, under current state law (RSA 674:2), a municipal master plan must include only two elements:

A vision statement, and a future land use plan

It is recommended, however, that the master plan at least comment on each of the following topics:

Transportation	Natural Hazards	Neighborhood Plans
Community Facilities	Recreation	Community Design
Economic Development	Utility/Public Service	Housing Needs
Natural Resources	Cult./Historic Resources	Implementation
	Regional Concerns	

Some of these topics may warrant a whole chapter, while others may only get a paragraph in passing, depending on the wants, needs and interests of each individual community. Keep in mind that only the vision and the future land use plan are required. And, towns may adopt sections on a rotating basis. The statute recommends that the entire plan be updated every five to ten years.

And how long does it take?

Clearly that varies, depending on how involved a particular community's issues are and what approaches they take to write the plan. A year's worth of effort is not out of the ordinary at all, and it can be much longer depending on local circumstances.

And what do you do with it?

Properly developed, a master plan is a policy document that is referred to often. What has been found to be successful in some towns is to break the final version into two volumes, a large one which contains the inventory information, and a smaller one that contains the vision statement, and the action items. As each section of the plan is prepared, the committee can review the inventory information for that particular category, the land use implications that derive from that inventory, and a series of policy and action items for to consider. It is those action items that set the stage for a work program once the master plan has been adopted.

In short, a good master plan becomes the basis for a wide variety of public actions, from subdivision review, to zoning discussions, to capital improvement plans. It is a key document.